



# Fr Tony Flannery

**R**EDEMPTORIST preacher Tony Flannery is the most headstrong of the six Irish priests whose outspoken and unorthodox views have been targeted for silencing by the Vatican. Flannery's determination not to be bullied into submission by the centuries old Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) has pitched him into direct confrontation with Rome's agent in Ireland, Archbishop Charles Brown.

For some time now it has looked likely that Flannery was doomed to excommunication, but the dramatic resignation earlier this year of the German Pope Benedict XVI and the election of the Argentinian Francis I, the first Jesuit pontiff from Latin America, has stirred hopes that the reign of intellectual terror in Roman Catholicism may be coming to an end. For once will the dreaded CDF be brought to heel and will Flannery be restored to public ministry and his good name be upheld? As battle rages, it remains to be seen if Francis can reverse an entrenched tradition of secretive authoritarian reaction in Rome,

and reconcile Catholicism with democracy and the Vatican bureaucracy with consultative decision-making.

Oh, what a difference a new Pope makes.

Just 18 months ago, the beleaguered Flannery faced excommunication from Mother Church and robust removal from his religious order for his "scandalous" writings. As a member of a religious Order which for decades was feared by the simple faithful for its hell-fire and brimstone preaching at parish missions and retreats, Flannery came under the surveillance in 2012 of Pope Benedict's official representative in Ireland, the New York-born Archbishop Charles Brown.

Although not being a career diplomat, Brown was a rising theologian on the staff of the CDF and was an unapologetic disciple of then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, whose theological trademark was to denounce relativism as the chief heresy in the modern world. Brown was horrified to discover that the Galwegian who preferred colourful open-necked shirts to the drab clerical garb – and to watch a GAA match rather than talk theology – was a skillful exponent of popular talks which watered-down strict church teachings and questioned traditional attitudes to birth control, divorce, abortion, priestly celibacy and the ordination of women to the priesthood.

But Flannery was to learn that CDF procedures fail to meet the most

elementary requirements of due process – the accused is unaware that he (or she) is under investigation until formal charges are brought against him; accusers remain anonymous and the grounds on which the charges are based are not given; the time given to respond to those charges is ridiculously inadequate, often as little as three weeks; and the accused is not allowed legal representation but may seek the support of one (and only one) "friend", who may not accompany the accused into the interrogation room.

Proceedings are held in secret, and questioning is conducted in a hostile and negative manner. The CDF is both prosecutor and judge with no appeal from its findings. Sentences are frequently quite disproportionate to the alleged offence. There has been excessive use of the sentence of automatic excommunication, *latae sententiae*.

## CENSURE

Flannery had not anticipated censure. Remote from the workings of the Holy See because of his pastoral ministry, it came as "a shock, a bolt from the blue" when he was telephoned to be told that the CDF "had their sights" on him. In due course, he was ordered to issue a public statement, accepting all church moral teachings and also that he accepted that women could never be priests. He was also warned about the requirement for total secrecy about the involvement of the CDF and to shun the media.

Summoned to Rome to meet the superior general of his Order in February 2012, he was told that he was in serious trouble and that the then Prefect, Cardinal Lavada, was taking personal charge of his portfolio. He was handed two A4 pages on un-headed and unsigned paper by his superiors which had come from the CDF. The first page contained four extracts from articles he had written for *Reality* relating to structures in the church and the need for reform, the nature of priesthood, the new missal, priestly celibacy and the role of women in the church. On the second page, his superiors were ordered to "seek to impress upon Fr Flannery the gravity of his situation".

He was not to be allowed to write or to give newspaper interviews. Further, he was to be instructed to withdraw from his leadership role in the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) and also from public ministry and to undertake a period of spiritual and theological reflection. Flannery was



## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

angry as he wondered “who had produced this document” of diktats and given them to his superiors. He wanted to confront his CDF accusers face to face, to show them that their quotations from his articles were cited out of context. He has not yet been given that opportunity.

## MEETINGS

Angrily, he realised his Redemptorist superiors in Rome, instead of standing up for him, had bought into the CDF’s way of thinking and acting. He realised that when it came to the test, “I as an individual would not be of any real significance... [and] I would be viewed as dispensable”.

Returning to Ireland, Flannery wound up his pastoral duties, including the saying of Mass in community and the hearing of confessions. He did not publish or give interviews and entered into a period of reflection in a retreat house in Ireland. However, he did not stop work with the ACP, which openly supported him. In early summer 2012, Flannery received another document from the Vatican, the contents of which exacerbated an already delicate situation. He had two meetings with his superior general, one in Ireland and the other in Rome.

In Rome he was told there had been another “very angry letter” from Cardinal William Levada. Back in Ireland, his period of reflection having ended, he resumed his pastoral duties while preparing a response to the new Vatican document, which he sent to his superiors in late June 2012. But there was a new twist to the story. By September 2012, with a new head of the CDF – Cardinal Muller – in place, there were further demands that his author’s statement be amended. New instructions to discipline Flannery were issued: he was to go on a further extended period of reflection to a retreat house outside of Ireland and he was to cease all ACP involvement. Believing he was being bullied by the CDF and his superior general, he again felt angry and prepared an extensive response.

But when Flannery refused to cease contact with the ACP, his superior general invoked rule 73, number 3, of the Order. This imposed a ‘formal precept of obedience’ which obliged him to obey or run the risk of being dismissed from the Order. Flannery refused to conform or sign any pledge. To do so would only humiliate him. In mid-January this year, the author went public in *The New York Times* and held a press conference in Dublin outlining his case.

All of this is documented in his book, *A Question of Conscience*, published last month, lifting the lid on the machinations of the CDF. In a foreword, former President Mary McAleese asked, “what mother treats a son as Tony Flannery has been treated?” Going on an autumnal offensive, Flannery’s ACP colleague, Fr Brendan Hoban, claimed that Archbishop Brown was the voice of ex-Pope Benedict. Hoban astutely cast the Apostolic Nuncio as being out of touch with the more liberal Pope Francis (see *The Phoenix* 20/9/13).

At the Humbert Summer School on

September 1 in Hoban’s hometown of Ballina, County Mayo, an emboldened Flannery declared that while his persecutors were unsure of how they stood with Pope Francis, he was sure that the CDF would back off, though it would never reverse its judgement and allow him to return to public ministry.

A tidal change favouring Flannery came with the publication on September 19 of a groundbreaking 12,000-word interview, carried out by the editor of the Italian Jesuit magazine *Civiltà Cattolica*, Fr Antonio Spadaro SJ, which was simultaneously published on several Jesuit websites around the world in English, French, Italian, German and Spanish, including The US Jesuit magazine *America*.

In his interview, the Pope called for the church to be “home for all” (the vision of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65) and not a “small chapel” focused on doctrine and limited to below-the-pelvis views on moral teachings (the Benedict-Brown model).



Charles Brown

Francis desired to “heal the wounds”, arguing that priests must be “merciful” because “the people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials”.

Significantly, Francis’s interview was given page one lead coverage by *The Irish Times*, which quoted Flannery as saying, “What the Pope said seems to amount to a fairly substantial critique of the way in which the Curia and, in particular, the CDF have been operating.” And Flannery added: “It changes the rules of the game in the sense that it appears that the Curia has largely been taken out of the business of dealing with disciplinary matters and it has been handed back to the local church to deal with it.”

Suddenly, it looked that Flannery could survive, especially as both the Pope and the Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin agreed that the problems should be resolved by the local hierarchy, not Rome.

But nothing is ever straightforward, even with divine planners. Archbishop Diarmuid is not involved in this dispute’s arbitration, according to Flannery, who in his book describes the Irish Episcopal Conference as dysfunctional and as showing no leadership. “The one among the bishops who has most capacity to lead” is Diarmuid Martin, but “for whatever reason he has not assumed that role,” writes Flannery.

## POLITICS

Most likely, Diarmuid feels that in the baroque politics of Maynooth he would be swamped by the rest of the hierarchy as Flannery is from the diocese of Clonfert, whose Bishop John Kirby is on Brown’s retirement and replacement files. Nor is it all sweetness and light on the Muller-Brown axis: the German and the Yankee are shedding sweat in second-guessing which tune the fiddling Francis will play next – collegiality or conformism? As the former British Prime Minister Harold McMillan was wont to say, matters will be determined by events.

Yet, the Franciscan script for October kicks off with a meeting in Rome of the special advisory group of eight cardinals appointed to come up with a roadmap for change. It will be open season for innovative proposals. Although still of the belief that the ban on the ordination of women is irreversible, Francis told Spadaro that “it is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the Church.”

A tempting quick-fix for Francis is to take up the suggestion of Fr James Keenan, a Boston Jesuit, that it is canonically possible for him to appoint women to the college of cardinals. Top of Keenan’s list is Linda Hogan, professor of ecumenics at Trinity College Dublin, who is not a cleric and is a married female. And the indefatigable Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan, the Irish-born theologian leading the 160-strong Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests, will not be coy in urging Francis to take a swipe at the machismo of the Church’s all-boys club. Also cheering on the new gang of eight via an Open Letter to Francis released on October 1 are an alliance composed of theologian Cathy Molloy of the Association of Catholics in Ireland, Sister Dairme McHenry of We are Church Ireland, Brendan Butler and, last but not least, Tony Flannery.

There is little light yet at the end of the tunnel for Flannery, who is intent of his own volition in stepping-down from the ACP leadership team at its October AGM. He lives under the shadow of an overnight automatic excommunication: once *Roma locuta est*, the decision is final. There is no room for the prodigal son in an unreconstructed Roman Curia. Flannery can still survive in the Church but his fate hinges on which Francis turns up on judgement day.

If the reformist hand of history is on Francis, he may choose as the next suitable posting for Archbishop Brown to move to Guantanamo Bay as prison chaplain. No doubt, a magnanimous Flannery would supply a testimonial.